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The Critique of Uncertainty Reduction

Riley Beard

Western Washington University

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The Critique of Uncertainty Reduction Theory

Author: Riley Beard
Advisor: Dr. Ee Lin Lee
Department of Communication Studies



Definition

Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT) (Berger & Calabrese, 1975): A heuristic theory which states that individuals feel the need to reduce uncertainty in initial relationship interactions that occur face-to-face in order to feel comfortable about developing the relationships

This need to reduce uncertainty is influenced by three factors and seven variables:

Factors:

- 1. Anticipation of future interaction: Expectation that the relationship will continue
- 2. Deviance: Any behavior that is not normal
- 3. Incentive value: Perceived costs or rewards gained from the relationship

Variables:

- 1. Amount of communication: How much individuals verbally communicate
- 2. Nonverbal affiliative expressiveness: Nonverbal signals that communicate warmth
- 3. Information seeking: Engaging in strategies to discover information about others
- 4. Intimacy level of communication content: Amount of self-disclosure
- 5. Reciprocity: Sharing of information between individuals
- 6. Similarity: Shared cultural practices or beliefs
- 7. Liking: Feeling of attraction or favor

Context

Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC): Any communication that takes place through computers, such as email, social media, video conferencing, and chat rooms

Individuals use multiple strategies in reducing uncertainty online:

Strategies:

- 1. Interactive: Acquire information through direct interaction between individuals
- 2. Active: Acquire information without direct interaction between individuals
- 3. Extractive: Acquire information from written online comments of individual
- 4. Passive: Acquire information through unobtrusive observation of individual

Identified Strengths of URT:

- 1. It is still widely used after four decades and despite cultural shifts
- 2. It has been tested and supported in multiple contexts
- 3. It has provided valuable insights and predictions about interpersonal relationships



Identified Weaknesses of URT:

1. Eurocentric:

- URT was developed by two white males in the United States and was written to be applied to white subjects in Western societies

Implications:

- Reinforces the dominant practices and ideology of Western culture
- Devalues other cultures
- Disregards other ways of reducing uncertainty

2. Methods:

- The majority of applications of URT have used quantitative methods of research

Implications:

- Produces generalizations which lead to stereotypes
- Does not provide intimacy or depth of information
- Disregards individuals' personal experiences

3. Contexts:

- URT was originally developed only to fit the context of initial interactions, face-to-face communication, and white U.S. culture

Implications:

- Results in other contexts may not be valid
- Reinforces the theory, but does not provide true insights into specific contexts

Suggestions for Future Research:

- URT needs to be studied intraculturally before interculturally
- Qualitative studies should be conducted in addition to quantitative studies
- Emic approaches should be taken before further etic testing

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